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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0936
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4497
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8027
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5588
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1404
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1365
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000145

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
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SUBJECT: BURMA: 88 GENERATION MOBILIZES FOR THE REFERENDUM
- CORRECTED COPY

REF: RANGOON 134

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Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) The 88 Generation Students (88GS) are mobilizing pro-democracy activists throughout Burma for a "vote no" campaign in the regime's upcoming constitutional referendum. During a recent trip to five of Burma's seven divisions, 88 Generation leaders met with NLD members, monks, and political activists to enlist their help in a nationwide educational campaign. Financing remains the pro-democracy activists' biggest obstacle, as the regime has successfully blocked its access to funds from the exile and border organizations that financed the opposition before the protests last September. According to a local contact, the constitution drafting was completed abruptly last Tuesday at the order of Senior General Than Shwe. The Senior General has not defined the procedures for the referendum, and the bureaucracy is too afraid to proceed without his instructions. End summary.

Vote No!

12. (C) 88 Generation leader Toe Kyaw Hlaing told pol/econ chief the organization is vigorously preparing a "vote no" campaign for the regime's May referendum on the new constitution. Toe Kyaw Hlaing recounted that, after the regime announced the referendum, there was heated debate among the various pro-democracy opposition groups, including ASSK's NLD party, on whether or not to boycott the referendum. Toe Kyaw Hlaing said most members of the pro-democracy opposition decided to participate in the referendum to try to defeat public approval of the regime's manipulated constitution.

13. (C) Toe Kyaw Hlaing said that different groups will be announcing their opposition to the new constitution soon and then beginning their campaigns to educate the public. Controversy still remains over when and how to do so, as the regime continues to arrest members of the pro-democracy

opposition. Toe Kyaw Hlaing said that 88 Generation has already begun their preparations for their "vote no" campaign, and will campaign most aggressively during the Water Festival holiday in mid-April. Water Festival in Burma is chaotic, with large crowds of people gathering in the streets throughout the day. The opposition anticipates that authorities will be tied up maintaining order, and that the crowds will make it harder for the authorities to track activists' movements. 88 Generation has designed a graphic for several posters it intends to distribute throughout the country, consisting of the word "NO" in large capital letters with a picture of Senior General Than Shwe in the middle of the O. Toe Kyaw Hlaing plans to distribute the posters throughout the country with the help of sympathetic book sellers, who will distribute the posters by hiding them in their weekly shipments of books from Rangoon.

Mobilizing Their Networks

¶4. (S) Embassy Rangoon helped fund Toe Kyaw Hlaing's recent travel to four divisions in Burma to meet and coordinate with pro-democracy activists from various factions. Toe Kyaw Hlaing also dispatched another 88GS leader to meet with pro-democracy activists in a fifth division. During his travels, Toe Kyaw Hlaing met with NLD members, 88 Generation Students activists, local monks, and politically-active university students. Conversations centered on how to counter the regime's constitution, how to produce new recruits for the pro-democracy movement, and how to successfully target more university-educated youth to help spread their message throughout Burma.

¶5. (C) To help educate villagers outside of Burma's main cities about their "vote no" campaign, 88 Generation will

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send university-educated activists back to their home villages, where they are highly respected for their degrees, to explain the implications of a "yes" vote on the constitution. The activists will emphasize that the regime's constitution will not free Burma from military rule, but rather entrench it, given the stipulations in the proposed constitution that reserve twenty-five percent of Parliament's seats for the military, define the military's role to "safeguard the constitution," and require Burma's future presidents to have prior service in the military. The former president of the Mandalay University Students' Union, Aung Win, will take the lead in organizing the "vote no" campaign in Mandalay. Famous comedian and political activist Zarganar is preparing an educational VCD for the activists to also use in their campaign.

An Encore from the Monks?

¶6. (C) 88 Generation will also enlist the help of village monks to spread the word to patrons of their monasteries. According to Toe Kyaw Hlaing, Rangoon's more politically-oriented monasteries are already assisting him to prepare for the campaign. Sympathetic local abbots have agreed to host activists from upper Burma who will visit Rangoon to meet with 88 Generation and receive internet training 88 Generation will host at local, "safe" internet cafes. On his recent trip, Toe Kyaw Hlaing visited several monasteries in Pakkoku. It was Pakkoku's monks who began last September's demonstrations; they assured Toe Kyaw Hlaing they were ready to do anything required to assist the pro-democracy opposition with their new campaign against the regime's constitution.

¶7. (C) Toe Kyaw Hlaing noted to us that the farther from Rangoon he traveled, the less informed and effective the NLD's members appeared to be. He doubted their ability to

successfully organize an effective campaign against the constitution, but was still eager to partner with the party to promote as much unity among the opposition as possible for the upcoming vote.

Desperate for Financing

¶8. (C) Toe Kyaw Hlaing noted that the supreme obstacle the opposition now faces is financing for their campaign and activities. The border has been severely tightened, and the activists have received neither financing nor equipment from the outside groups since September. The situation is getting desperate, he emphasized; 88 Generation's funding channels from AAPP and NED have completely dried up. A recent plea from Toe Kyaw Hlaing to AAPP for new cell phones for the organizers had gone unanswered, he claimed.

¶9. (C) Toe Kyaw Hlaing lamented that with the final version of the constitution yet to be released to the public, and with so little time remaining before May, it will be very difficult for the regime to conduct the referendum freely and fairly. Generation Wave, a newly formed group of young political activists based around Burma's popular hip-hop artists, released a statement yesterday calling for the regime to release ASSK and all political prisoners; to allow free speech and organizing before the referendum; to allow international observers; to create a fair voting system; and to create a referendum commission of "trustworthy, accountable persons."

Paralyzed with Fear

¶10. (C) A very reliable local contact told us today that Burmese MFA Director General Paw Lwin Sein told him that the referendum would be done by "the ballot box", and not by a

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GOB-managed mass rally. The DG claimed the final draft of the constitution would be released to the public one month before the referendum. Paw Lwin Sein elaborated that the constitution drafting was finished abruptly on Tuesday, February 19, at the order of Senior General Than Shwe, but that nobody had been informed of how to proceed with the referendum. No one dared to take the initiative to propose to Than Shwe how the referendum should be conducted, in case he became angry with them for proposing something other than his vision. According to the DG, everyone in government is paralyzed and waiting for Than Shwe to give them further instructions.

Comment

¶11. (C) 88 Generation has long anticipated a referendum on the regime's constitution and appears to be mobilizing the networks they put into place over the past eighteen months. They are way ahead of the NLD, who affirmed to us again today that they plan to proceed with a "vote no" campaign too (Reftel), but are still working on the specifics of their plan, which they will then need to run past Aung San Suu Kyi for her approval. Embassy Rangoon has been assisting leaders of 88 Generation Students for the past year with an Embassy small grant. Now that exile groups are no longer able to channel money to these opposition groups, we hope to increase our financial assistance to them so that they may proceed with their campaigns to educate the public about the referendum. Now that leaders of the opposition have decided to participate in the referendum to promote a public vote of protest, it is more imperative than ever that UN Special Envoy Gambari emphasize to Than Shwe during his March visit to Burma that the referendum be free and fair, and that the

UN Security Council will take note if it is not. End
comment.

VILLAROSA